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Summary: Later, she will remember how his voice sounded and think that maybe that wasn't anger; maybe it was fear. And maybe those two sound very similar coming from Billy.

1. Falling

Max and Lucas are alone in Max's room, and she feels like a rebel. They're not even doing anything special, just hanging out. She's shown him her room and her stuff, and they've talked about everything and nothing for a little while before they both got quiet.

She fidgets a little and asks:

"Do you want anything to drink?" Because that's what you're supposed to ask guests, isn't it?

Lucas, who had just opened his mouth as if he was going to say something, shrugs awkwardly and says:

"Okay. Yeah."

She leaves him in his room as she walks to the fridge in the kitchen. The rest of the house is silent, because they are the only two there. Her mom is visiting family for the weekend, Neil has to work until late, and Billy? Billy is going to some party, apparently, or at least that's what Neil had said this morning at breakfast. Not that she cares where Billy is or what he's doing – as long as he's not here, now, she's happy.

Max is not supposed to be home either, of course. She is, for all intents and purposes, spending the night at the Wheelers' house for an epic D&D campaign with the others. It's been arranged for a week, since Susan announced that she'd be away. And Max *will* spend the night at the Wheelers' house, with her friends. It's just, instead of going there immediately after school, she and Lucas will get there later in the evening.

She wanted to spend a little time alone with him, is all. Wanted to show him her room. And – if she's being honest with herself – she wanted to have Lucas over at her house like a normal person. She knows that Billy would be furious if he knew. If he found out ... she'd be in so much trouble. She shudders a bit, thinking of it, and only takes one can of soda from the fridge. Just in case Billy has counted them or something.

When she gets back into her room, she wordlessly hands Lucas the soda, and he takes it with a raised eyebrow.

"Thanks. Don't you want one, too?"

She thinks of how Billy would react if she found out, and shakes her head before she sits down on the bed next to Lucas. Lucas opens the soda, hesitates, and glances over at her.

"We could share, if you want?"

She glances over at him, too, and their eyes meet for half a second before they both look away in different directions. She feels like laughing.

"Yeah, okay", she finds herself saying, and Lucas hands her the can. She takes a drink, and hands it back. Their fingers brush against each other accidentally when he takes it, and he almost drops it. He takes a drink, too, and then they both glance at each other at the same time and smile.

There is a thrill in Max's chest, and she wonders if she wants him to kiss her. Then she wonders if maybe *she* should kiss *him* instead, and then the front door opens and she hears voices and *shit shit shit* that's Billy's voice, and that's Neil, and they are so screwed.

She finds herself standing up, staring at Lucas, who is also standing up and staring right back at her. The panic passes between them like something other just did, and she reads the same alarm in Lucas' eyes as she knows is in her own. *What do we do?*

Billy's gonna kill them.

She looks from Lucas to the window and back. They could make it if the opened it really quietly, and then –

"Is Maxine home?"

Neil's voice. She doesn't hear what Billy replies, because she suddenly remembers that she hung up her jacket on the hook inside the door, as she always does, and maybe Lucas did too and *they are so, so screwed.*

Lucas looks like he just thought the same thing, and their eyes meet again. Well, at least Billy can't do much with Neil there, right? Lucas squares his shoulders and Max takes a deep breath and they walk out of her room together. Max kind of wants to hold his hand, but knows that that would be a horrible idea, so she doesn't.

Neil is halfway into the kitchen and Billy is standing with his hand on the door to his own room, and both of them still when they see Max and Lucas in the hallway. Max's heart is beating fast, but she doesn't take her eyes off Billy. Billy, who stares at her and looks like he can't believe what he's seeing, like he can't believe that she would dare defy him like this. It would give her some satisfaction to see him look so shocked, if she wasn't so afraid of what he'll do to her, later.

Lucas clears his throat and Billy's gaze snap to him, while his face transforms into a mask of anger. Lucas sees it too, and turns to look at Neil instead, and despite the fact that Max can almost feel him shaking beside her, his voice is steady when he takes a step forward and says:

"Hello, mr Hargrove. I'm Lucas Sinclair, I'm a friend of Max's."

He extends a hand towards the elder Hargrove, and Max forces herself to look away from Billy, who's begun to shake his head, to see Neil's reaction. When she sees the look in his eyes she startles, and she finds it hard to draw a breath.

Because the look on Neil's face is disbelief, and hate, and *fury*. It's a look she's seen many times on Billy's face, but never on Neil's. She has never actually thought that the two look much alike until this very moment, and it absolutely terrifies her.

Lucas gulps and falters in the face of so much unbridled hate, and he takes half a step back, but Neil is suddenly right in front of them and there's a *smack* and Lucas flies into the wall and crumples on the floor and Neil turns towards Max, face red and hand still raised after the backhand he gave Lucas, and he *roars*:

"*How. Dare. You.*"

She wants to make sure Lucas is okay, she wants to look at him and

run to him and take him away from here, but she is rooted to the spot in fear and can't look away from Neil's face. It's like with the demodogs and the Upside Down, only worse, because she *can't move*. Not even when Neil draws breath to yell something else and raises his hand to hit her; she manages to close her eyes and tense up, and she *hears* the impact of a fist on flesh, but she doesn't feel it and distantly wonders why.

She opens her eyes and Billy is in front of her. She can only see his back, because he's standing between her and Neil; has pushed Neil back a couple of steps and Neil is looking at him in disbelief.

"Take him and go", Billy says without turning around, and when she doesn't move he turns his head slightly to glare at her and screams: "Run, you stupid fucks!" and his angry face (that looks just like Neil's angry face the second before he *hit Lucas*) shocks her into action.

Later, she will remember how his voice sounded and think that maybe that wasn't anger; maybe it was fear. And maybe those two sound very similar coming from Billy.

She runs to Lucas, who has already started getting up, and helps him to his feet. They don't even consider the front door, because they'd have to pass both Billy and Neil to get there, so they run for Max's room, because her window is easy to open and she has used it to get in and out of the house before.

Just before she gets into her room, however, she is bowled over and falls to the floor in the hallway with a body over her. She twists her ankle and screams at the pain of it, but the body that fell on her – Billy, she realizes – gets up and Lucas' hand grabs her and then he's pulling her into her room.

Lucas has the presence of mind to slam the door shut – not that it will help – before he runs to the window and opens it. He has one leg outside when he turns to Max, who's still on the floor and holding her ankle. His eyes grow impossibly bigger, and he moves to get inside again. Max shakes her head.

"I'll hide!" she says and crawls towards the bed. "Get help!"

He shakes his head, but there's a grunt and a sound like a body hitting the wall just outside the room, and they both flinch. She dives for the bed, crawls underneath it, and doesn't look away from Lucas once.

"Please", she says, because someone needs to get help and *Lucas can't be here*.

He hesitates for a second longer, then nods. Jumps out the window, and is gone.

Max crawls as far under the bed as she can, and has just reached the wall when the door to her room is crashed open. There are fast steps of someone running to the window, and she holds her breath and doesn't make a sound even though she thinks that whoever is out there must hear her panicked heartbeat and will surely drag her out of there any time now, and –

"Fuck!" she hears, and it's Neil, of course it's Neil.

The window is slammed shut, and the steps retreat back outside towards the hallway. The door is closed, but she doesn't dare take a breath in case it's a trick and he's still inside and just waiting for her to make herself known.

"You useless piece of shit."

Neil's voice, from the other side of the door. She releases a breath in relief; he's not in the room.

There's a sound of a hit, and Billy cries out.

"I trust you to take care of your sister –"

Another hit, another soft cry.

"– and this is how you do it?"

One more hit, and there's the sound of a body hitting the wall, then wood creaking and glass breaking. The lamp on the table by the phone, Max's mind supplies. She doesn't open her eyes, not even when she hears Billy groan.

"You let her bring *that boy* into this house?"

Metal against broken glass, a sharp intake of breath, a rustle.

"Into *my* house?"

A sound as if something has been thrown into the wall.

"And then you *dare raise your hand against me?*"

Billy's voice:

"Wait, I'm sorry ..."

There's a sound that Max doesn't recognize, like a *whoosh* followed by a dull impact, and she doesn't know what's going on – only that it's bad, because Billy *screams*.

Neil's voice is hard when he says:

"You will be."

Whoosh, impact, scream.

Whoosh, impact, scream.

Whoosh – like the sound an electrical cord for a lamp would make if it was swung through the air – and the *thud* of the impact it would make if it hit a young man's back, or chest, or head – and the *scream* ...

Max can't breathe.

Whoosh, impact, scream.

Whoosh, impact, scream.

Whoosh, impact ... sob.

And Max curls up under the bed, her fingers in her ears, and she cries without making a sound because she's so scared and *this can't be happening*.

She doesn't hear anything but her own breaths and the rushing in her ears, and it's a blessing for a time because she can pretend that *this isn't real it can't be real*, but then she is suddenly aware of tiny vibrations in the floor underneath her, the wall at her back. She stills, and *feels* another impact.

Holding her breath and removing her hands from her ears, she listens. No more whooshing noises, but there are impacts. Kicking, she realizes. Neil is kicking Billy, and he's growling all the while. Max doesn't listen to Neil's hateful words, though, because she can hear Billy's voice between the grunts and gasps.

"I'm sorry", Billy says, and "Sir" and "No, sir" and "Please, I didn't ..." and then only "Dad, *plea*—"

And there's a *crunch* and Max is certain that it can't have come from Billy because that sound can't come from a human body, but then Billy *shrieks* and starts sobbing, and Max hears Neil spit:

"You are *pathetic*."

There's another kick, and after that Billy doesn't make any more sounds, even though Neil keeps kicking.

Max doesn't know how long it's been, how long it was since Lucas escaped through her window, but it feels like another lifetime. Maybe it was *that* that wasn't real, maybe this is the only thing that's real; a new reality, the *only* reality. The normally so brave Max hiding under the bed, the normally so calm Neil beating his son to death in the hallway, and Billy ...

Billy.

There are other sounds now, people screaming, a scuffle, voices she doesn't recognize. She can't hear what they say, can't make sense of the words, doesn't move from under the bed. She cries, and she cries, and she still haven't opened her eyes.

She's not even aware of when someone opens the door to her room, but she lets out a scream and squirms away when there's a hand reaching for her under the bed. She doesn't keep quiet anymore –

she's been found, what's the point? – and she screams and she cries until she hears a voice she can recognize, that pierces through the terror.

"Max, please, it's me. *Max!*"

Lucas.

She opens her eyes and there is Lucas' face peering at her from the floor just a short distance away. He's holding his hand out towards her, but doesn't reach for her, and his face is a little swollen and his eyes are red as if he's been crying. She reaches for him, crawls out from under the bed and then they're hugging and neither of them are letting go.

Max is distantly aware of that there's a man in the room with them, a man in a police uniform, but Lucas is between her and him and Lucas feels safe so she must be safe. The policeman gets up slowly, says something and goes to shut the door. There are people in the hallway – Max can hear them before the door closes – but she doesn't want to think of that, doesn't want to think of who else is out there.

Lucas is here in her room, and Max is here too, and neither of them are in the hallway – and for now, that has to be enough.

2. Landing

She doesn't remember how she ended up in the hospital. She knows Lucas was with her the whole time, and she distantly remembers hearing the voices of the others – Mike, Dustin, Will – at some point, but she doesn't know how she got there or how much time has passed. She is sitting on a bed while a woman with curly brown hair is bandaging her ankle ("it's just a light sprain, dear, you'll be okay in no time") when her mother rushes into the room and sweeps her up in a hug.

Max thinks she stopped crying at the house, but in her mother's arms she can't hold it back and she breaks down in tears again. Time passes. Her mother doesn't let her go.

Maybe she sleeps.

Now it's later, and Max is sitting in a chair in Billy's room in the hospital. Lucas is not with her anymore, and her mother is talking to some doctors. She is alone with Billy.

Billy looks like hell. One eye is completely swollen shut, his lower lip is swollen and almost blue, and there are bruises on his face. She can't see his chest or his back or the rest of him, but she imagines that it can't be good. His right hand is bandaged, because he has two broken fingers – that was the only thing she managed to hear the doctor say when she went out into the corridor, before her mom saw her in the doorway and gently pushed her inside again and shut the door. As if she didn't want Max to hear. As if Max didn't hear it all happening in the first place.

She remembers the sounds of fists and feet meeting flesh, the dull impact sounds of an electrical cord that meets a human body, and the little sounds Billy had made when he lay on the floor outside her bedroom door, and she doesn't want to look at him.

She has seen him beaten up before, of course. Bruised, bleeding, bandaged, banged up. After all, her brother is a violent and aggressive kind of person, and is always getting into fights. For as long as she has known him – or as long as she's had to live in the

same house as him, because it's becoming clear that she doesn't *know* him – he has been coming home all beat up, with bruised knuckles and a smirk on his face like he's proud.

Only, now when she thinks back, maybe his knuckles weren't always bruised. Maybe it was just his face.

She glances over to him where he's lying in the hospital bed; still and silent, with his eyes closed. She has rarely seen him this still. He's usually jittery, full of anger and itching for an outlet. And she's learned to stay away from him, afraid that he'll take it out on her somehow.

She remembers Billy's voice, pleading with words she's never heard him utter before: "Sorry" and "please". And thinking back on it, it feels like a dream, because Billy has *never* apologized for anything, has never *begged* –

Only, it had sounded like a mantra. Like something he'd said a thousand times; like something that spills automatically from a person's lips when fear makes a person's brain shut down. And if that's true, that means –

This is not the first time Neil has done this to Billy. Far from it.

Everything slots into place, and she feels like crying again. But she is hollowed-out, empty, and she has no more tears to spare.

She reaches for his hand, instead. The one with no broken fingers.

And this, of course, is when he wakes up.

He flinches at her touch, then flinches at the pain that caused, and then he sees her. His eyes (or the one he can see out of, at least) dart around the room, and when he sees that they're alone, he relaxes slightly and lets out a groan.

Max let go of his hand as if burned, and doesn't know what to do.

"Fuck."

She doesn't think he meant for her to hear it.

"Billy?" she asks, voice almost a whisper.

"Fuck off", he replies, but it's without heat.

She doesn't say anything, and he's not meeting her eyes for a long time, but eventually he turns to look at her again.

"Neil?"

Max shrugs. She's not sure on the details, but:

"The police came. They took him."

Billy makes a face like he's in pain, and Max stands up, ready to ... she doesn't know what, exactly, but whatever it is she wants to be ready for it.

"Should I ... get someone? A doctor, or ...?"

"No."

Billy doesn't say anything else, and eventually Max sits down on the chair again. She is full to the brim with questions she wants to ask, things she wants to shout and scream at him, but one look at him tells her that he probably feels the same way, so she bites her tongue. Neither of them speak for a long time, until Max bites the bullet.

"I'm okay. Lucas is, too."

She doesn't know if that's the right thing to say, and Billy doesn't react to it other than to flick his eyes over her for a second. She continues:

"I don't know what time it is. Mom's here. She's talking to the doctors right now. And you're really messed up."

At this, Billy gives a hoarse laugh that sounds anything but cheerful.

"Believe me, I know."

Something in his voice and the way he tilts his head away makes Max frown, and repeat:

"You *are* really messed up. As in, he really messed you up. Neil, I mean."

You didn't mess up, she doesn't say, because they don't have that kind of relationship. But maybe Billy hears it anyway, because he glances over at her and frowns.

"Why are you even here?" His voice is hard when he continues: "Don't you have anything better to do, like sneaking off with your little boyfriend?"

Her first reaction is annoyance, but then she remembers the way that his voice had sounded like anger back at the house, but also like fear, and the frustration slips away.

"I'm sorry", she says instead, voice small.

He didn't expect that, she knows by looking at him. He takes a breath to say something, and she barrels on before she loses the nerve:

"This was my fault. I'm sorry."

He looks like he wants to agree, and she fully expects him to shout at her that yes, it was her fault for not doing what he told her to, and for bringing Lucas home and that she's a stupid bitch ...

... but then he deflates and raises his hand (his left), to drag it down his face. He winces, and swears.

"*Fuck.*"

Then he takes a deep breath, and mutters:

"I can't deal with this."

Again, Max is unsure if that was for meant for her, but he turns to her again and it looks like it pains him when he starts talking:

"Listen, you little shit, because I'm only gonna say this once."

She prepares herself for his ire, and is shocked to the core when he says:

"This was not your fault."

Her face must show her surprise, because he snorts – and then winces, because that obviously hurt – and continues:

"Neil is a fucking asshole. Always was. That's on him, not you."

And there's something raw in the room with them, as if the air itself is raw with the things that are unsaid, and Max knew she shouldn't take advantage of it; knows that whatever it is is vulnerable and frail and that she might shatter it if she speaks, but she wants to *know*:

"Why did you get between us and Neil?"

And as soon as she speaks the words she wishes she could take them back – because *what*, does she think that Billy actually *cares* about her? That's *insane* – and she holds her breath and hopes against hope that Billy maybe didn't hear her, but Billy sighs again and tries to shrug as he says, simply:

"Because I can take it."

Because you shouldn't have to take it, he doesn't say, because they don't have that kind of relationship. But Max hears it anyway, and that raw energy in the air in the room? That suddenly feels too much like *feelings*, and Max and Billy are *nothing* alike but they both suck at the mushy crap so Max says, without thinking:

"Clearly."

She raises an eyebrow and motions at him, beaten to a pulp and currently lying in a hospital bed, as to indicate that yeah, *clearly* he's adept at taking a beating, no consequences here, oh no. The tension in the room disappears when he rasps out a laugh:

"Shut up, kid."

She gives him a small smile, because the world has changed and this is a new reality she has to get used to, and what is a smile in the grand scheme of things, really?

He exhales through his nose and it almost sound as if he's amused,

and then he says:

"You should go home."

She thinks of home; of the house to where she took Lucas and her room where she hid under her bed and the hallway where there is probably no longer a table with a lamp, and she feels sick. Feels her face do something, hears her voice go hard.

"No."

That's all she says, but that word holds a thousand meanings; no, that place is no longer home; no, she doesn't want to go back; no, she's not leaving him. She doesn't know what he hears, but he sighs again and closes his eyes. Eye, *whatever*.

"This doesn't change anything", he says, and it's quiet, as if he's not talking to her.

And it's her turn to snort now, because he's tired and in pain and probably doped up on painkillers, but does he really think that this doesn't change anything? That the world will look the same when he wakes up next time?

"God, you're stupid", she says.

Because this changes *everything*.

"You're still a little shit", he murmurs, and it's not a minute later that he's asleep.

She waits for a couple of minutes more, just to be sure, before she carefully reaches out and takes his hand in hers. And she doesn't let go for a long time.